



EU-ASEAN Relations After the 2024 Elections Roundtable Discussion

Event Report

Date: 23 July 2024

Location: EIAS Brussels

The European Institute for Asian Studies (EIAS) hosted a closed-door roundtable discussion focusing on the evolving EU-ASEAN relations following the 2024 EU elections. The event was conducted under the Chatham House Rule to encourage open and candid discussions, drawing insights from distinguished panellists and stakeholders representing both EU and ASEAN interests.

The discussion commenced with an analysis of how the 2024 EU elections have reshaped perceptions of the EU. A significant point raised was the European Parliament's unique position as the only supranational parliamentary body that actively sends diplomats worldwide, emphasising its commitment to global engagement. The image of the EU and the European Parliament was described as evolving, with an increasing number of representatives holding diverse views on European integration. However, the majority still support the EU's commitment to integration, prioritising green and sustainable growth, competitiveness, and defence and security as the main agenda items. The discussion highlighted continuity at the EU level and stability in voter turnout during the EU elections, emphasising the electorate's consistent support for pro-EU integration policies. Despite internal differences and business not being as usual, the diversity within the European Parliament is seen as central to finding common ground, with party ideologies being set aside in favour of a unified approach towards sustainability. This commitment is evident in the EU's green initiatives, which are considered non-negotiable in its foreign policy and trade discussions. However, a consensus emerged that there is insufficient engagement between the EU and ASEAN at the people-to-people level, with limited EU delegations visiting ASEAN countries. The dialogue stressed the need for improved relations between the European Parliament and ASEAN nations, noting that strategic partnerships could foster enhanced cooperation. The importance of establishing regular diplomatic visits and high-level dialogues was highlighted as a means to strengthen ties and to underscore the significance of the relationship.

The discussion illustrated the potential for deepened EU-ASEAN collaboration, revealing that finding common ground on negotiations could improve mutual perceptions and facilitate a better understanding of regional dynamics. In particular, the centrality of ASEAN in the Indo-Pacific was acknowledged, with the EU seeking to enhance its engagement in this

strategically important region. Concerns were expressed about the EU's approach to sustainability and due diligence, with ASEAN business communities wary of potential impacts on trade. A balanced approach that respects both economic and ecological considerations was deemed necessary. The private sector's role in EU-ASEAN relations was assessed, pushing for enhanced collaboration between businesses from both regions. The lingering effects of the COVID-19 pandemic were cited as a possible reason for the diminished interaction, and participants called for a revised approach towards EU policies such as the European Union Deforestation Regulation (EUDR) and the Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM). Engaging ASEAN representatives in proactive dialogue and negotiations was seen as essential to address these concerns. Suggestions for bi-annual summits and regular visits to improve diplomatic relations were put forth, emphasising the need for sustained engagement beyond crisis-driven interactions.

The discussion also touched upon the challenges faced by both regions in communicating their strategic objectives effectively. It was noted that while the EU often views itself as a cohesive entity, ASEAN countries might perceive it differently. This divergence in perception necessitates a more comprehensive approach to marketing the EU's collective interests, with a specific focus on trade and migration. Participants highlighted the low number of ASEAN migrants in the EU, suggesting that increased information dissemination could foster better understanding and cooperation. Despite challenges, the discussion acknowledged the potential for positive developments in EU-ASEAN relations. ASEAN's interest in deepening ties with the EU was evident, although concerns about high emissions and human rights issues within ASEAN countries were raised. The necessity for an EU-ASEAN human rights dialogue was proposed as a means to address these concerns and build mutual trust. Moreover, the scope and scale of the EU's engagement with ASEAN were compared to other global partners, with the consensus being that ASEAN should be prioritised in the EU's external relations. Further suggestions to improve relations between the two blocs included a bi-annual ASEAN week in the European Parliament, for ASEAN to act more as a group and to potentially appoint an ASEAN Ambassador in Brussels, to enhance the knowledge and understanding of ASEAN in the EU and vice versa, as well as for the EU to better explain its policies to its partners in Southeast Asia and to consult them in early stages of policy-making.

Overall, the roundtable discussion concluded on an optimistic note, recognising that while structural differences exist between the EU and ASEAN, the relationship has evolved significantly over time. There was a collective agreement on the need for reciprocal engagement, with both sides acknowledging the importance of strategic partnerships and the role of cultural differences in shaping future interactions. Participants emphasised that while Europe's immediate priorities may not always align with ASEAN interests, ongoing research, policy dialogues, and people-to-people exchanges could effectively influence and enhance bilateral relations. The event highlighted that as the new EU leadership assumes its mandate, there is a timely opportunity to advance the EU-ASEAN strategic partnership and address shared challenges in an increasingly interconnected world.